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CHILDISM

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Childism is the automatic presumption of superiority of any adult over any child; it results in the adult's needs, desires, hopes, and fears taking unquestioned precedence over those of the child. It goes beyond the biologic necessity that requires adults to sustain the species by means of authoritative, unilateral decisions. What is at issue is how the decision is executed and how the child is afforded dignity and respect.

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In contemporary America there is a belief that

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the society is child-oriented and that children take priority. This is, in actuality, far from the truth. Whatever qualities the child possesses, he is discriminated against simply because he is a child. We contend that childism is the basic form of oppression in our society and underlies all alienation and violence, for it teaches everyone how to be an oppressor and makes them focus on the exercise of raw power rather than on volitional humaneness. The object of this article is to emphasize the ubiquity of childism, in the hope that with increased awareness it can be minimized, for — like its derivatives, sexism and racism — it is found in virtually everyone. Modification of childist practices would alter other oppressive systems that retard the development of humankind to its full potential.

"As a result of micro-aggression, the child remains on the defensive, mobilizing constantly to conform"

The theory of childism as the basic form of oppression evolved from a project concerning children and the mass media. We were studying commercials and the content of television in regards to racism, and content analysis forced our attention to the similarities between racism, sexism, and generationalism, including childism. On the theory that television both reflects and molds the society, we tried to analyze what was being presented and how it would affect the children who watched it.

A child accomplishes prodigious intellectual feats — learning one or more languages, the cues of his culture, and the symbolism of his environment — and television has considerable influence on this process. It shows the child what is permitted, accepted, and expected. So we looked at how children were depicted in television commercials, and in essence they were most commonly shown in a devalued way. They were dirty, they whined for their food, they retarded family cooperation, and they were "physical creatures" as opposed to thinking beings. They were dishonest, allowing Mother to believe an untruth; they were sneaky, taking food and hiding it behind their backs. Children in groups played in a disorganized, divided fashion until the arrival of an adult, who guided them to coordinated, conforming behavior. As we watched, we felt that children must conclude they are a nuisance, that they invariably foul things up, and that they must expect to be yelled at, deprecated, and kept in a dependent position. This can only lead to a self-devaluation that will combine with other societal forces to create self-hate.

ESSENTIAL DYNAMICS OF CHILDISM

In childism, the child-victim is put on the defensive. He is expected to accommodate himself to the adult-aggressor, and is hardly ever permitted to initiate action or control a situation. The vehicle for most adult action is micro-aggression; the child is not rendered a gross brutalization, but is treated in such a way as to lower his self-esteem, dignity, and worthiness by means of subtle, cumulative, and unceasing adult deprecation. As a result of this constant barrage of micro-aggression, the child remains on the defensive, mobilizing constantly to conform and perform. This incessant mobilization is not without cost, psychologically and probably physiologically.

For example, two neatly dressed, polite subteens enter a restaurant for lunch. The waitress dallies at another table, talking with a male customer; then she takes the order from a couple of young adults who were seated after the children, all with graciousness and civility. Finally she takes the order from the youngsters, and her manner subtly changes. She seems more preoccupied, neutral if not actually unfriendly. She throws the menu at them, saying "What do you want?" before they have time to deliberate. As she brusquely takes their order, she asks tersely, "Do you kids have money?" When she serves her other two tables, she is again charming and careful. When the food for the youngsters arrives, she spills it as she shoves it towards them.

These children have not been physically assaulted. They have, however, been subjected to

a number of pejorative acts; the posture, gestures, tone of voice, and the way the menu and food were handed to them were an abuse that indicates their inferiority, for no other reason than their social attribute of childhood. If such abuse were an isolated occurrence, it could be ignored. Yet in all probability these youngsters receive the same gratuitously abusive behavior many times a day from "loving parents," "devoted teachers," "kindly physicians," "concerned policemen," and "considerate shopkeepers." Clinicians must ponder the consequences of such continuous oppression in terms of the socialization of our children.

THE OPERATION OF CHILDISM

The ultimate reason for all oppressive systems, including childism, is that they make the aggressor feel good. This would seem to be far removed from the acknowledged fact that children need to be guided, to be taught, to have curbs placed on their behavior until external limitations become internalized. But, as we shall examine later in more detail, parents have themselves been victims of childism in their years of growing up, and so they in turn inflict the same process on their children.

1. The child must be grateful for all that is done for him. "Your daddy gave up his lunches so that you could have that dress."
2. The child must see how good things are for him, particularly when compared with the plight of others. "Eat your vegetables — think of the starving children in India."
3. The child must have his goals defined by an adult, and preferably accept them with happy gratitude. "You have to learn to play the piano rather than the violin because everyone has a piano in their home."
4. The child must accept confinement or immobility at the convenience of the adult. "Stop running around when I have a headache."
5. The child is segregated for the adults' convenience. "You have to eat in the kitchen tonight, because we are having dinner guests."
6. The child must never ally himself with a group of his peers who threaten the adults' stability. "All teenagers have to be off the streets by nine o'clock."
7. The child must have his inferiority underscored. "I told you that you couldn't hammer that nail by yourself."
8. Any positive value that the child creates must be reduced or negated. "Anybody who can get A's in arithmetic ought to be able to stop wetting his bed."
9. The child's time and space can be abused at will by the adult. "Move out of the way when you are passing someone on the sidewalk."
10. The child is expected to conform to the adults' timetable in his progress toward maturity and independence. "You may be old enough to be drafted, but you are not old enough to be fooling around with girls!"

In short, the operation of childism is congruent with the technical aims of brainwashing. It is compounded by the unpredictability of adults and the variability and arbitrariness of their decisions. The child is expected to mature, yet he can precipitate anger by taking on responsibility, especially without permission. He is told he should learn everything, yet there are large areas about which he is not expected to ask or to learn. Inconsistent and incomprehensible applications of discipline make it impossible for the child to conform even if he wants to.

THE EFFECTS OF CHILDISM

A child quickly becomes conditioned to the proposition that to be big means to be good, powerful, and right. Once he accepts the theory that "big" equals "good," he relates terror, tyranny, and deprecation to failure to please the powerful. Thus begins a constant psychosocial and physical mobilization. His life becomes a series of disasters and crises in which he attempts to please the powerful aggressor. Do adults remember how it was in second grade when, from a basis of perceived powerlessness, they had to cope with the fear of imperfect reci-

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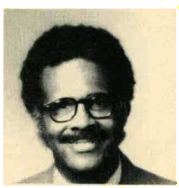

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tations and the appearance of the sixth-grade bully? Do they remember the demands to conform, to perform, and to assert themselves even though no source of strength was provided them? The childhood of most people is an extreme one, in which the call to mobilization against disaster and crisis is perpetual, and the need for cautious, sustained effort is constant. Despite these harrowing circumstances, the child receives no credit for surviving.

This places the child in circumstances that bring about serious, protracted, and often unnecessary stress, both psychologic and physiologic. It has a cumulative effect that may exert a powerful influence on his adult behavior, just as sexist or racist practices affect the entire future of women or members of a minority group. For countless children, childist practices contribute to countervailing fantasies of overcoming, ridiculing, and punishing the aggressor. These fantasies eagerly invite vengeance, the ancestor of all violence, and action is initiated at the earliest possible occasion and perhaps as frequently as possible. Vengeance is equated with justice, and hazing becomes the common ingredient in all dominance-submission patterns, whether the victim is a student, a patient, a minority-group member, a child, or an employee. "I got through it, and it was good for me." "You have it easy, you ungrateful person!" "I must demean you for your own sake."

Theory would suggest that the more childism a person suffered, the more likely he is to identify with the aggressor when dominant and to accept victimization when submissive. The political observer recognizes the inflexible bureaucrat who endows his minor post with all the terrors of a colonial master. The clinician recognizes many cases in which the victim participated in his own degradation and continually invited his own catastrophes. The more childist abuse a person receives, the more likely he is to be immobilized toward purposive, independent effort and to define himself as sick, inept, or powerless. Since the individual defines the situation in this manner, not surprisingly so does the society, veryifying the individual's definition. It is this vicious cycle that accounts for the long-term effects of childism.

In the group, the more childism is suffered, the more the individual or aggregate of individuals will be paralyzed by low self-esteem, peer conflicts, and craving for attention. Lessened ability to share, a greater unwillingness to cooperate, and a sharper focus on what cannot be done will characterize the peer interactions. This occurs because, in the peer situation, these individuals have a need to vent justifiable wrath and an even stronger need not to be hazed by someone who is not a genuine, certified oppressor. Thus the members of the group tend to battle each other in a contest to bolster their own esteem by means of domination and the procurement of a prominence that reduces doubt concerning their puerile position. Adult groups that manifest such dynamics may attribute their troubles to racism, sexism, or whatever, but in reality the root trouble is childism, with the added superstructure of other prejudice.

Another long-range effect of childism is the common situation in which the group is unevenly distributed in its childist influence. Many marital conflicts revolve around child-rearing practices in which one parent is more childist than the other. When such a discrepancy is gross, the viability of the family may be seriously compromised. The role of childist abuse that the parents suffered is not usually thought to be related to domestic crises. Yet overt childist behavior is much more easily recognized and remedied than the parents' unconscious attitudes and acting-out concerning sex role patterns or minority-group identification.

RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

All this suggests the need for research. Comparisons could be made to help answer questions about the relationship between decreased childism and decreased violence or increased

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cooperation. The specific indicators of childism could be correlated among large groups to determine the relationship between childism and divorce, family conflict, and interpersonal violence. In fact, the whole range of aggressors, from schoolyard bullies to great powers, could be catalogued according to their childist behavior and attitudes.

It might be possible to reverse a great deal of childism by attention to its presentation in the mass media. Two approaches are required. We need research on how to make the programming and content of media less childist, with education of producers, writers, and directors about childism so that they could remain creatively productive but become more sensitive to content analyses and the influence of their productions in terms of gratuitous exploitation of children. In addition, people in general would have to become much more sophisticated and creative in their consumption of media. Creative productivity and creative consumption would go hand in hand, helping each other move the use of mass media towards their potential for making excellent communities in which live happy and healthy people.

We also must try to determine how childist attitudes and behavior affect communication. All oppression causes the victim to receive distorted, exaggerated, incomplete, and tardy information; as a result, he has only a fraction of the information necessary to deal with his world, since the oppressor defines that world and what information resources the oppressed can use. Investigations could be designed to reveal childist behavior to both adults and children, and by manipulation of this new insight we could see if groups would learn more, communicate differently, or act more wisely with the drastic reduction of childism.

We can study classroom performance of children who are under childist pressure from parents, teachers, or peers. Psychophysiologic measures are required: for example, what is the effect on the organism when it is terrorized into sitting quietly with hands folded? Is there any relationship between childism and such indicators of social distress as drug abuse, suicide, arrest rates, or delinquency? Do troubles of modern society, such as chronic alcoholism and dangerous operation of motor vehicles, reflect the problems of people who have been victimized by signs of childism? Are children who suffer less childism actually more healthy and more confident?

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PSYCHIATRY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

CONCLUSIONS

Children remain the most oppressed group and the most easily oppressed group. The more we understand the oppression of children, the more we understand oppression of any individual or group. With a more informed understanding of this process, many traditional dominance patterns could be modified. The question then occurs as to whether humaneness can be taught. Can altruism become a part of the curriculum for teachers and parents?

For adults, a conscious effort to consult with children and to dignify them with true and consistent respect is the route to reduce this oppression. If we are able to give more psychologic regard to children, we may find it easier to give the same regard to other potential victims of our oppression and to be more aware of the damage done by gratuitous violence to people whenever the occasion permits. This realization might be the first step on the long road to developing a true psychologic humanity of mankind. ▣